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The role of vocabulary in the development of communicative ability: some comments

Sharon Lapkin and Susanne Carroll

Modern Language Centre

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

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The role of vocabulary in the development of communicative ability: some comments[1]

We want to take up Sue Gass' challenge to reflect on an appropriate research agenda for examining the development of vocabulary as a central component of communicative ability in a specific pedagogical context -- that of French immersion education. Although Canada is officially bilingual, this fact has little day-to-day impact on the average anglophone student of French as a second language whose sole contact with French tends to be confined to the classroom. Student surveys administered in the context of large-scale evaluations of French immersion programs have included items designed to elicit information on the amount of out-of-school contact with the second language -- whether through relatively passive activities such as watching television or through active efforts to meet and interact with francophones in the community. Even where there are opportunities in the immediate environment for such interaction -- in the national capital, or in Moncton, New Brunswick, for example -- the survey data suggest that immersion students do not seek them out (Lapkin & Swain, 1984, 1985).

For the majority of students, then, French language input is largely confined to the classroom, thus providing a situation where input is tightly controlled. Moreover, the fact that most instructional time is devoted to

teaching through the medium of French means that the students' second language skills reach relatively high levels of development. What an ideal laboratory for examining the development of lexical knowledge and skill in a second language!

Garrett (this volume) has stated that "we must have some idea of what learners are actually doing with language before we can study the effect of manipulating pedagogical variables". In this short paper we will provide some information about (1) what immersion students can do in French, with specific reference to lexis, (2) what teachers are doing by way of vocabulary instruction in some immersion classrooms, and (3) a possible research plan for investigating vocabulary learning in this context, given what we know about the properties of words and the organization of the lexicon.

1. Immersion students' lexical performance

Data reported here come from early immersion classrooms where students have had all their early instruction (kindergarten through grade 3 in most cases) entirely in French, followed by at least half of their school program delivered in French until the end of grade 9. After grade 9, the number of subjects taken through the medium of French varies from two to four (one quarter to one half of their program).

In recent years we have been collecting second language data from immersion students at the secondary school level through the use of a testing unit designed to resemble a teaching unit -- materials built on students' interests, consisting of thematically linked oral and written tasks intended to elicit the best performance possible (Green & Lapkin, 1984, Swain, 1984).

One of the written tasks is a composition which is assessed for lexis, along with other grammatical and discourse features. The lexical measures involve counting the number of verb types to obtain a sense of lexical range, and determining how many of these types can be regarded as 'sophisticated' by assigning a value of "1" to each verb which does not appear among those listed as most frequent in **Le français fondamental** (Gougenheim et al., 1964).

Baseline data on the same task have been collected from comparison classes of monolingual francophone students from Quebec. Quantitative comparisons presented in Table 1 suggest that immersion students become more nativelike on these particular lexical measures as they progress through the secondary grades.

Aside from these quantitative results which are confined to verbs and have not encompassed other lexical categories, there are at least two

striking gaps in the type of information we have on the lexical proficiency of immersion students. The first relates to their receptive proficiency -- how well do immersion students understand spoken or written lexical items (word recognition in isolation as well as word recognition in context)? Evaluation studies (e.g. Swain & Lapkin, 1982) have suggested that many immersion students achieve nativelike listening and reading comprehension skills by grade 8, but such statements are based on global measures which emphasize deriving the main message from extended written text or oral discourse. We know of no studies focussing on the word recognition skills of immersion students or on their ability to identify new lexical items based on what they already know about French. Secondly, returning to the productive domain, what qualitative information have we on the vocabulary of immersion students? A recent study by Harley et al. (1987) compared verb vocabulary in grade 6 immersion student writing samples (two compositions and three request letters per student) with that of native French-speaking peers. There were four main findings arising from hypotheses based on the work of Levenston (1979) and Adjemian (1983) among others:

1. Immersion students used a higher proportion of high-coverage verbs (i.e., words with less specific denotations such as <u>faire</u>) than native speakers.

2. Immersion students used a lower proportion of syntactically and morphologically complex verbs such as pronominal and derived verb types than native speakers.

3. Semantic and/or syntactic incongruence with English L1 plays a major role in immersion students' lexical and grammatical errors, as well as in their non-use of some French verbs.

4. Lexical similarities between English and French, especially cognates, help to increase the French lexical resources of immersion students.

This type of qualitative analysis has not been conducted at higher grade levels, where, from a quantitative perspective at least, it would appear that immersion students may have caught up to their francophone peers.

2. Lexical Instruction in Immersion Classes

As virtually the sole source of spoken input, the teacher talk and instructional techniques focussing on vocabulary are of overriding importance in studying the developing lexicon of immersion students. Carroll (1987) has recently analysed transcripts from ten grade 6 immersion classes (along with some curriculum materials in use in those

classes) with a view to relating what linguists know about the lexicon to instructional techniques which could facilitate the development of lexical proficiency in French. She derives the following (non-exhaustive) descriptive categorization of instructional activities from her data analyses:

planned/unplanned

systematic/haphazard

written input/oral input

L1 prior knowledge/L2 prior knowledge

direct control of item choice/indirect control

interpretation/formal focus

The planned/unplanned dimension identifies the extent to which vocabulary instruction is seen as a purposeful activity, occupying a distinct place alongside other types of language-related instruction. Planned vocabulary instruction would involve decisions about what aspects of lexical information should be taught (e.g. derivational morphology, semantic networks) and how. Unplanned instruction allows for spontaneous teaching of lexis in response to learners' expressed or intuited communicative needs.

A related dimension is that of systematic versus haphazard instruction. Even if vocabulary is acknowledged to be an important part of

the language curriculum, instruction can be focussed and systematic (e.g. teaching rule-governed relationships such as the formation of French adverbs by adding a suffix, ment, to the feminine form of the adjective) or occasional and unsystematic.

Written input is often associated with more formal registers than spoken input. Similarly, there may be more overt redundance in spoken language than in written where the need to be explicit is greater in the absence of non-verbal aids to communication. (This has obvious implications for the choice of lexical items.) Although these distinctions are not absolute, the range, distribution and relative frequency of lexical items will clearly be affected by one's choice of medium. Hence the need for exposing immersion students (for whom literacy in the second language is as important as the development of oral communicative ability) to lexical use in both modes.

One of Harley et al's findings cited above suggests that knowledge of English cognates may facilitate the learning of certain items of French vocabulary. This is one example of the possible uses of the L1 in helping the second language acquisition. Carroll points out that the similarities in the graphic representation of English and French words appear greater than resemblances in pronunciation. Thus crosslinguistic pedagogical techniques might be better explored through reading and writing activities where

words may be less familiar, while intralinguistic phenomena such as masculine-feminine alternation might best be studied through oral practice.

The direct/indirect distinction as it applies to the control of item selection for vocabulary instruction relates to who decides what specific words will be taught, at what stage of learning, and in conjunction with what other features of language. Lexis undoubtedly influences what reading materials the teacher will choose for her/his students. In communicative classrooms, the perceived communication needs of the learners may determine what lexical items are used, and the natural tendency of more competent speakers to accommodate to their less competent interlocutors may mean that oral language is not as lexically rich and varied in a situation which may be characterized by indirect control of lexical choice.

Finally, the instructional focus may be on the meaning or interpretation of a specific word, or on formal features of that word (e.g. spelling, pronunciation).

Time does not permit an in-depth consideration of how these activities could facilitate L2 vocabulary acquisition (this is discussed in considerable detail in Carroll, 1987); but let us consider one example where

the descriptors might be 'planned', 'systematic', 'written input', 'prior knowledge of L2', and 'indirect control', but where the primary focus is clearly on formal features of a lexical item.

In the following exchange, the teacher has planned a lesson on the vocabulary of the passage to be read, and begins with a question about the meaning of a lexical item:

(a) T: un "bottillon de paille" Qu'est-ce ça veut dire "un bottillon de paille"? D'où est-ce que ça vient ce mot-là "bottillon" Regardez-le un peu

S1: bouteille

S2: beau

S1: bouteille

T: "botte" "botte" Je prends une botte, vous savez, une botte de paille

S3: C'est un mor/c'est comme de la paille qui est mis dans un morceau

T: Oui Vous vous rappelez le film/pas le film!/le ballet qu'on a vu ensemble qui était "La Fille Malgardée"? Vous vous rappelez les paysans qui sont venus avec des bottes de paille sur la tête/euh sur l'épaule?

S4: Et il y a un/

T: Quelque chose qui les attache ensemble

S5: Une corde

T: Corde Bon! On arrête les/les commentaires (irrelevant text) mais alors/Pardon! le mot "bottillon" est plus petit que botte Comme vous vous rappelez vous avez fait un exercice "livre: livret", "porte: portière" euh

S1: maison maisonette

T: "maison: maisonette"

S2: ruisseau

T: "ruisseau: ruisselet"

S3: fille fillette

S4: garçon garçonnet

T: "nappe: napperon" Alors le mot "bottillon" c'est un petit/une petite botte de paille

To get at the meaning of the diminutive bottillon, the teacher directs students' attention first to the meaning of botte and then turns to the morphological distinction at issue. The formal distinction between botte and bottillon is addressed by recalling a previous exercise on the formation of the diminutive. Only once the analogy is established does the teacher provide a definition of the word.

Consider a second example from the same lesson:

(b) T: Qu'est-ce ça veut dire "une pincée"?

S1: un tout petit

T: Un tout petit peu! (irrelevant text) Faites-moi/Comment est-ce que vous dites une pincée de sel, oui? (student mimes action) Voilà!

Tu prends comme ça (gesture) avec les/les doigts

S2: un ' pinch ' (long exchange about significance of throwing salt over

one's shoulder)

T: Ça (gesture) c'est une pincée de sel Comment est-ce qu'on appelle ça? (gesture)

S3: une poignée

T: Poignée Bravo! Une poignée, n'est-ce pas? Une poignée de eum de noisettes, une poignée de riz, n'est-ce pas? et une pincée de sel. Très peu, c'est-à-dire on/comme une pince

These exchanges are informative and spontaneous in that they reveal meaning in a systematic fashion and clearly indicate the function of the suffix which is the focus of attention. Furthermore, the teacher provides examples of uses of the words which are natural and spontaneous. They refer to and utilize the experiences of the students. The only minor improvement one might suggest to reinforce the structural comparisons would be to make explicit the relationship poing:poignée and pince:pincée as well as to mention other words illustrating the relationship

(bouche:bouchée, cuillère:cuillerée, etc.). The idea would be to explicitly draw the learner's attention to the rule-governed nature of this relationship.

Finally, these exercises illustrate the functional identification of the morphemes since they are used to focus on the expression of a given meaning (rather than just on the form itself). The diminutive is actually a morphological category rather than a semantic type but it corresponds reasonably well to a concept, namely a small (denotative) or cute (connotative) thing. So exercises which teach that -ette, -et, -on all express this concept are not only teaching form, but also function or meaning.

3. Research Perspectives

The two examples given above illustrate good second language teaching techniques because although they are embedded in a fairly traditional 'explication de texte' type of reading comprehension exercise, the students' attention is focussed explicitly and systematically on particular morphological generalizations that instantiate a specific semantic notion. Thus the text is being exploited for several purposes at once, but each is signalled as discrete, and the learner is permitted to focus on one thing at a time. The inventory of linguistic aspects that can be addressed through such an exercise includes phonology, graphology

(sound-symbol correspondence), morphology, syntax, semantics, and discourse as well as sociolinguistic distinctions.

Had the teacher chosen to do so, she might have focussed on some of these other dimensions. In text (a) the 'garçon garçonnet' example serves as an example of a phonological rule whereby the nasalized vowel is denasalized under particular conditions. Some morphological properties of words such as bottillon or poignée were the focus of the lesson transcribed in (a) and (b) and have been discussed above.

The word botte has other meanings also, the most common being 'boot'. The possible exploration of polysemous meanings is an example of the semantic exploitation of the vocabulary item under study, and it can lead to a consideration of syntactic properties of its associated verb botter ('to shoe') or sociolinguistic nuances as in ça me botte ('suits me!'). Similarly, the use of diminutives as expressions of tenderness or emotion could have been examined as well as alternative strategies such as the use of petit (ma petite) or reduplication of epithets (Il est mignon mignon mignon.)

The possibilities are endless -- and to tackle all of these networks at once would almost certainly be a mistake. But to take all of these relationships among linguistic systems into account in selecting vocabulary

for detailed attention in syllabus design and in planning related instructional activities is merely to pave the way for more effective learning of vocabulary and thereby of a broad range of linguistic knowledge. Moreover it provides the basis for studying the relationship between what is done in the classroom and the knowledge that students acquire.

At a minimum we have identified three major research thrusts we intend to pursue in the area of immersion acquisition of French lexis in the immediate future. The first involves obtaining data on the receptive L2 lexicons of immersion students to complement the information we have of a 'product' nature. The second is to develop more detailed descriptions of that product by conducting qualitative analyses of oral as well as written language data already on hand. The third and most important line of inquiry is also the most complex, and involves manipulating syllabus content and instructional variables so that the relative effects of different pedagogical strategies can be assessed.[2]

In conclusion, we would like to make some comments about the role of vocabulary in the development of communicative language proficiency which includes grammatical, discoursal and sociolinguistic components. If sentences are indeed "projected" from the properties of the lexical items that they contain, as Chomsky (1981) has claimed, then a considerable

amount of grammatical knowledge will consist of knowledge of the morphosyntactic, argument and theta properties of words. If discourse competence involves minimally the ability to produce coherent and cohesive text (cf. Halliday & Hasan, 1976), then these will be established in part in terms of the relations defined within and across lexical sets in given semantic fields. Recognizing and exploiting the ways in which lexical items can define register, style and dialect must be part and parcel of sociolinguistic competence. Thus vocabulary as an 'entity' cuts across these components. We feel it is both appropriate and useful for future research to flesh out these components through the study of vocabulary in the developing grammars and interlanguage systems of the L2 learner.

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Footnotes

1. We wish to thank Doug Hart, Laurette Lévy and Razika Sanaoui for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

2. For a recent experiment along these lines in the area of teaching past tense distinctions in French, see Harley, 1987.

Table 1

Number of Verb Types and Sophisticated Verbs

Used by Immersion and Francophone[a] Students Across Grades

Grade		Verb Types						Sophisticated Verbs					
		Immersion			Francophone			Immersion			Francophone		
		$\bar{X}$	SD	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	N	$\bar{X}$	SD	N
9	(Carleton)	15.60[b]	5.74	15				1.93[d]	1.67	15			
9	(Toronto)	13.43[c]	2.82	7	20.58	5.01	19	1.14[d]	1.07	7	5.47	2.89	19
9	(New Brunswick)	13.93[c]	6.13	70				1.54[d]	2.52	70			
10	(Carleton)	16.15	4.88	13				2.46	1.61	13			
					18.33	7.63	6				3.67	4.89	6
10	(Toronto)	18.29	3.20	7				2.71	1.50	7			
12	(Carleton)	18.92	4.86	24	16.56	6.85	100	3.92	2.38	24	3.81	2.68	100

a The grade 9 francophone group is of similar SES as the immersion groups. This also holds at grade 10; however, the francophones are bilingual (from a French-language high school in Ottawa). The comparison group for grade 12 immersion students are in their graduating year, which in Quebec, is the equivalent of grade 11. Also, these students are not as academically oriented as the immersion groups.

b Score is significantly lower than that of francophone comparison group at $p \leq .05$

c Score is significantly lower than that of francophone comparison group at $p \leq .01$

d Score is significantly lower than that of francophone comparison group at $p \leq .001$